

The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October
2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

Intercultural Interaction Experiences in a Tertiary Level Institution in Malaysia

Hariharan N. Krishnasamy^{a*}, Mohd Hafidz Hussein^a, Syarizan Dalib^a

^a*Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate intercultural interaction experiences of international students and local instructors in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia, namely, Universiti Utara Malaysia. The interaction experiences focus on verbal communication only. A qualitative approach was used to elicit information on verbal communication and the challenges faced by the participants involved, which were the Arab students and Malay instructors. Data was collected in 2010/2011. The findings show that there are challenges that both parties face when communicating verbally. The understanding of challenges faced by communicators in intercultural encounters may provide useful pointers for developing intercultural communication competence.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Keywords: Intercultural interaction; international students; verbal communication; challenges; Arab students

1. Introduction

The internalization of higher learning institutions and the ever increasing number of international students has created a global workplace. As people of different cultures live and work together, intercultural interactions is inevitable. For example, international students need to interact with the administrators or academics to gain an understanding of the university system, administrative matters and academic procedures. However, such intercultural interactions, especially verbal communication, can be challenging. Culture contains subjective elements which influence how people shape and control their interactions (Porter & Samovar, 2004). Differences in those

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-012-474-9024; Fax: +6-04-9285382
E-mail address: hn1084@uum.edu.my

elements may affect the dynamics of interactions as members tend to bring their own cultural expectations to the setting (Oetzel & Toomey, 2001; Sosik, 2002).

2. Research problem

As more international students enroll in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), especially from the Middle East, cultural contact between the international students and Malaysians is inevitable. Interaction will take place at several levels among international students and different groups of people. Intercultural communication takes place between the international students and academic staff as well as administrative staff in UUM. It would be helpful to have insights of the challenges the interacting parties would face when there is intercultural communication. Presently, there is a need to look into the various aspects of intercultural communication so that interacting parties are sensitive to cultural differences and ways of interacting among different cultural groups. Amongst others, this would include an awareness of different aspects of interaction that involves verbal communication.

3. Research question

The two major research questions in this study are as follows:

- What are the intercultural interactions experienced by international students in UUM?
- What are the intercultural interactions experienced by teachers in UUM?

The intercultural interactions focus on verbal communication.

4. Significance of study

There is a need for more studies on intercultural communication among international students and administrators as well as academicians in UUM. UUM has sent several delegations abroad to promote the intake of international students to pursue the courses and programs offered by UUM. Thus, it would be pertinent to be aware of the proximity or distance between the host culture and the guest culture so that communication is facilitated and international students are better able to cope with any potential challenges in the communication process. Intercultural competence would be of critical importance in students' academic life as well as the service providers so that the international students are able to optimize the benefits of tertiary level education when they are in UUM.

5. Literature review

Theoretical perspectives on intercultural communication competence receive great attention from scholars in the field of intercultural communication (Arasaratnam, 2004; Williams, 2005; Pedersen, 2010; Yuen, 2010). Intercultural communication competence derives from two important terms: intercultural communication and communication competence.

Intercultural communication generally means communication between people from different national cultures and it is limited to face-to-face communication (Gudykunst, 2003). For example, intercultural communication occurs when a member from one culture interact with a member of another culture such as a Malaysian interacting with an Arab. In other words, intercultural communication involves interaction between people who adopt distinct perspectives and symbol systems which affect their communication process (Porter & Samovar, 2004).

Common interpretation of competence refers to the ability to apply language skills to situations (McCain, 1996). Communication competence generally carries the assumptions that it is contextual (a person may be competent in one situation but incompetent in another), appropriate and effective, produces outcomes and it is perceived by the people who are interacting (Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008). Hence, competent communicators are considered as those who are able to co-orient and coordinate their behaviors (verbal and non-verbal, but the focus in this paper will be verbal communication) to accomplish personal goals as well as fitting themselves in the expectation of the situation (Wiseman, 2003). Most scholars agree that knowledge, motivation and skills are the crucial components that constitute communication competence (Arasaratnam, 2004; Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2003). Knowledge refers to the extent a person wants to converse with another; motivation implies that

how much a person knows about a specific context, the other person in conversation and the subject; and skills represents successful performance of a communicative behavior (Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008).

Language and verbal communication are important components of intercultural communication. A close connection exists between language and culture as both develop closely in an intertwined manner. Language influences the world-views and thought patterns of the community of speakers who use it. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Kay & Willet, 1984), which is often referred to as the linguistic relativity hypothesis, postulates a systematic relationship between the grammatical categories of the language used by the speaker and the world view of the speaker. The world view would include how the person perceives the world, the events that take place and ways of being in the world. It is linked to the social world of the speaker and how the speaker relates to the world. In the present context of communication, this particular hypothesis would be relevant in the study. For the Arabs, language is given a special position in their lives, their world views and the Arabic language itself is an integral part of the Arab identity. Since communication with the local community would be inevitable when the Arabs take residence in UUM, the influence of the Arabic language on Arab students' thought patterns and communication patterns cannot be ignored. No two languages are alike and this could potentially lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding or poor communication between those parties that are involved, that is, the predominantly Malay speakers and the Arab speakers. An important concept that links language and thought can be traced to the concept of codability.

In the context of two cultures that come into contact, codability refers to the ability to translate a word, group of words, phrase, clause or sentence from one language to another. Bilinguals would be aware that languages have certain characteristics and qualities that allow them to convey certain meanings better than others (Wierzbicka, 1992). In fact, it would be difficult to find perfect synonyms for every word in one language in another language. There are words in certain languages that are highly lexicalized but might need several words, phrases or larger linguistic units of meaning to convey in another language. The word could relate to an object, event, process, concept, location, colour, emotion, phenomenon, action etc. A classical example would be that of the Athabaskans, a tribe among the Eskimos. They have more than 100 words to describe snow. This can be attributed to the part snow plays in their daily lives, as it is a part of their physical experience. Their cultural and language experiences are closely intertwined with snow. Thus, snow-related concepts are highly lexicalized, when compared to other cultures in which snow is not a part of their daily experiences or landscape. This notion of codability is important because it shows that the process of encoding concepts in two languages is not exactly the same. Language influences thought and that is why certain lexical categories are better understood in one language when compared to another. However, the experiences can be shared in another language, even though perception of the experience is not exactly identical.

Finally, the review of some related literature suggests that verbal communication in the context of intercultural communication is a complex issue. Zaharna (2009) explicated a conception of intercultural competence from the perspective of the Arab world, though it is acknowledged that the Arab world is not homogenous. The critical components that informed competent communication across the Arab world include linguistic ability, sensitivity to and knowledge of dialectical differences of spoken colloquial Arabic, modesty and humility as the guiding features of exemplary behaviors, and ability to build and maintain social networks. When individuals cross their cultural group and interact with cultural others who hold different cultural expectations, it is likely that individuals may experience uncertainties leading to difficulties or challenges in interaction (Gudykunst, 1998; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

6. Research methodology

The study was conducted in the UUM campus. UUM is situated in the northern state of Kedah, almost touching the border of Thailand. UUM was officially established on 16 February 1984.

The research team comprised of two Malay lecturers and one Indian lecturer from UUM. From the total of three lecturers, 2 were males and 1 was female. The participants in the study included Arab students studying in UUM and teachers. The total number of students participating for the individual interviews was 25 with 5 students from Yemen and 4 each from Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Palestine. Only 4 female students participated in the study as it was difficult to get female participants. The Arab students narrated their initial experiences, that is, their first nine months in the UUM campus. 10 instructors were chosen based on frequent or active interaction with the Arab students for a period of at least 1 year. The central theme of the investigation was on intercultural interaction

with the emphasis on verbal communication between the international students as well as the teachers in UUM.

The qualitative approach is used in this study. Individual interviews were conducted with all the participants with follow-up interviews to gather detailed information on verbal communication in the context of intercultural communication competence. They narrated their initial experiences, which were the first nine months of their study in UUM. The individual interviews were conducted between October 2010 and July 2011. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to themes and subthemes.

7. Findings/discussion

7.1. Arab students

There were many communication problems that arose because of the choice of words or a lack of vocabulary. One of the major problems was with the way words were understood by the students. Words could be interpreted differently by the listener and the speaker. This was a potential barrier to intercultural communication.

The study revealed that several words had created issues in verbal communication.. The same word could be understood differently and this had resulted in miscommunication for some of the students. The contexts in which this interpretation of words occurred were mostly in formal situations. For the Arabs students, it was a matter of deep concern as the choice of certain words had embedded meanings in them. It was an issue with the Arabs when the word they used conveyed meanings other than was intended. One example is given here with the word *help*. This is a response of one of the Arab students that exemplifies what several of the others felt. It was with the word *help* and how it carried different types of assistance that the students expected.

We were told that everyone here is friendly and will really try to help us. I will not say this about most lecturers or teachers. They are trying to help. What is actually happening in some situations here is very different. Sometimes, it is not easy to get help. I tried to contact an officer several times because of visa problems and the officer was on leave. I tried to contact the front desk and everyone said just be patient. How to be patient when you have a dateline?... Honestly, I am angry that we have been promised that we will receive help easily... We are supposed to help our friends, share information. Even when we know a lecturer is helpful, we tell our other friends about it.

The word *help* here has different connotations when used in different cultural contexts and has resulted in different expectations. The word *help* could have different connotations in the Arabic, Malay and English language. The word gives rise to several interpretations when it is translated and used by different speakers (Wierzbicka, 1992).

The worldview of the Arabs, too, play an important role in communication (Zaharna, 2009). One common characteristic among most of the Arab students is the central role of families in their lives. This is of significance because it affects the way they view other commitments when family issues arise. Family issues are given top priority and Arabs students expect academic and non-academic staff to understand their concerns when there is a conflict of commitment between family issues and university related matters. When a student talks about family related matters, the listener is expected to listen to the whole story, understand and act in a manner favorable to the Arab students. The following view expresses the Arab students' expectations.

My daughter had high fever once. I had some deadlines to do the assignments. I did not know what to do because to me I have to be there when my family needs me. So, I decided to absent classes for a few days. I know we have to be present but the family duty is very important. I hope the lecturer understand this and not punish us. In my country, this would not be a problem.

This is one of the many instances in which the act of verbal communication is taken very seriously and the listener is expected to respond in a certain way, as perceived by the Arab student. Family obligations situated within academic expectations in Malaysian settings and the way the issue is expressed need to be addressed so that the communicative engagement produces positive outcomes (McCain, 1996; Wiseman, 2003). Otherwise, such issues become problematic as cultural expectations, obligations and academic standards to be observed could be different (Oetzel & Toomey, 2001; Sosik, 2002).

7.2. Teachers

One important aspect of verbal communication was that the Arabs had problems with the language or the way of expressing themselves. The excerpts below show the views of many of the instructors regarding the issues related to verbal communication and the English language.

I think they have a problem with the language. They really don't know how to deal with the teachers at times. This is obvious from some of their choice of words. They say things like they will meet me at 3pm. It is like I am free and they decide when to see me. Who is the instructor? It's not the way to talk. Maybe, they don't mean it that way, but that is the way they know how to say things.

I think they are respectful, but how they talk is a different story. One said that he will see me at a certain time. He never asked me whether I was free but seems to imply that I am free. Maybe, he doesn't know the proper way to ask for an appointment and expects me to tell him.

I think they respect, but the way they communicate this is different. I think we need to understand their ways because it is definitely different from the local students. They talk in a way which is not the same as the local students.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis offers the possibility to explain the miscommunication as words do not have exactly the same meaning in different cultures. Additionally, some of the students are used to Arabic English while some of the Malaysian speakers could be more familiar with Malaysian English, and what it means. Power issues might also come into play as certain varieties of English are privileged over the others.

There is another aspect to the verbal communication. Most of the instructors mentioned that the Arabs were the ones who are capable of arguing in the most heated manner but within a while, they are all back together. As one of the instructors mentioned:

Many of them argue a lot in class but then, the next thing you realize that they are all talking as though nothing had happened. Sometimes, when the arguments are really heated, they would use strong words and use a lot of hand movement.

There are communication patterns and styles that are probably more acceptable in the Arab classrooms than in the local Malaysian context. However, what is probably expected in the Malaysian classroom could be different from what is valued as acceptable to some of the Arab students. If there is a wide gap between what is tolerated and what is preferred, it could lead to the perception that the other party does not have the knowledge, skills or motivation to create a classroom atmosphere that is conducive for pedagogical purposes (Arasaratnam, 2004; Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2003). In other words, it could be perceived as ethnocentrism, as certain practices or norms of certain cultures are privileged over the others.

8. Conclusion

This research has served as a platform for teachers and students in UUM to express their opinions through their experiences. It is not meant to judge the international Arab students or the actions of the instructors based on predetermined attitudes, values and beliefs. The way forward is to allow a healthy discourse of competing views on issues related to intercultural communication. An appreciation of the cultural underpinnings of the parties involved in educational settings and manifestations of these inherited cultural behaviors could pave the way for attracting more students to the University. On the other hand, ethnocentrism in its various forms such as judging the cultural behavior of others based on superior notions of the local culture could be a potential barrier to intercultural communication.

Although this research is not meant to make generalizations, some patterns of responses have emerged that serve as indicators that challenges in verbal communication in the larger context of intercultural communication need to be addressed skillfully, in a non-judgmental way. While the sample size is limited, and mostly male, the prevailing

view among the interviewees suggests that stakeholders could benefit by having a closer look at potential problems that could affect recruitment of Arab students. Likewise, students too need to be proactive in understanding intercultural similarities and differences so that effective communication rather than miscommunication takes place.

References

- Arasaratnam, L. (2004). Intercultural Communication Competence: Development and Empirical Validation of a New Model" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association*. Retrieved from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p112579_index.html
- Flaherty, B., & Stojakovic, J. (2008). Intercultural Competence as a Key Element toward Cultural Integration of International Students in the United States. *The annual meeting of the NCA 94th Annual Convention*. Retrieved from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p258719_index.html
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). Intercultural Communication: Introduction. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Cross Cultural and Intercultural Communication* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kay, P. & Willet, K. (1984). What is the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis? *American Anthropologist* 86(1), 65–79.
- McCain, B. (1996). Multicultural team learning: An approach towards communication competency. *Management Decision*, 34(6).
- Oetzel, J. G., & Toomey, S. T. (2001). *Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pederson, P. (2010). Assessing intercultural effectiveness outcomes in a yearlong study abroad program. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 34 (1), 70-80.
- Porter, R. E., & Samovar, L. A. (2004). *Communication between Cultures*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Spitzberg, B. H. (2000). A Model of Intercultural Communication Competence. Retrieved from <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~diepthai/images/A%20%20model%20of%20intercultural%20communication%20competence.pdf>.
- Spencer-Oatey, H., & Franklin, P. (2009). *Intercultural interaction: A multidisciplinary approach to intercultural communication*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sosik, J. J. (2002). Work-Group Characteristics and Performance in Collectivistic and Individualistic Cultures. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 142(1), 5-23.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1992). *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Human concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, T.R. (2005). Exploring the impact of study abroad on students' intercultural communication skills: Adaptability and sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(4), 356-371.
- Wiseman, R. L. (2003). Intercultural Communication Competence. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Cross Cultural and Intercultural Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yuen, C. (2010). Dimensions of diversity: Challenges to secondary school teachers with implications for intercultural teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(3), 732-741.
- Zaharna, R. S. (2009). An associative approach to intercultural communication competence in the Arab world. In Deardorff, D. K. (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 179-198). Thousand Oaks, CA.